

PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW / Vicki Goldberg

# Art That Turns Television Frogs Into Princes

**A**LTHOUGH ARTISTS IN THIS CENTURY have made diligent efforts to introduce the most derelict items into the court of art, you might have thought television was too thoroughly massacred, too yahoo, too committed to the froggy life for any number of kisses to turn it into a prince. You would have been mistaken.

By the 60's, artists were already taking on the tube. Pop artists borrowed images from the cathode-ray bank of imagery, which generously made interest-free loans. Others removed content from the programs and forced the electrons to behave like modern art.

Television had moved in force, not only replacing life (which proved too strenuous by comparison), but demonstrating that it was equal to nudes and landscapes as an inspiration. While television was manipulating just about everything from our opinions on Vietnam to our chosen brand of beer, artists ingeniously, even desperately, manipulated television, from Tom Wesselman's painted rûde with a real television set to Robert Heineken's altered photographs of the screen, from Les Levine's multiple monitors to Ed Paschke's paintings of neon-colored people divided by unsteady horizontals.

At this moment, the Whitney Museum of American Art is presenting the earliest and the Museum of Modern Art the latest manifestation of art's interplay with the dominant mode of communication. At the Whitney, "The Howard Wise Gallery: TV as a Creative Medium, 1969" will be up through next Sunday, and at the Modern, "Projects 47: Luc Courchesne" is installed through Aug. 23.

The Whitney's show, organized by John G. Hanhardt and Matthew Yokobosky, curator and assistant curator of film and video, is a partial re-creation, filled in with photographs and videotapes, of the first gallery exhibition exclusively devoted to video as an art form. This was mounted by Howard Wise and had a seminal influence on artists working in the medium. The Modern's show, organized by Barbara London, associate curator in the department of film and video, is an interactive video installation by a Canadian artist and professor of information design.

In 1969, "TV as a Creative Medium" seemed positively rowdy by virtue of being both so new and so relentlessly in flux. Art had generally prided itself on staying the same for years, but these images bounced around in an electronic St. Vitus's dance. What really caught the public's attention was Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman's "TV Bra for Living Sculpture." For two hours a day, Moorman (who died in 1991) played the cello in the gallery while wearing a pair of small television sets on her breasts; the action of her bow wreaked havoc with the baseball players and soap opera stars appearing on her bosom.

This act was relatively decorous, as two years earlier Moorman had appeared topless in a performance of one of Mr. Paik's compositions. For the Whitney show, he has created a sweet and not very challenging homage to Howard Wise.

If network television was not brimming over with esthetic revelations in 1969, neither was the art that so ingeniously sabotaged its

signals. Some critics were hostile. As often happens when artists start experimenting with new technology, the mechanics were clever but the design did not fly. Yet the exhibition was a landmark: it established video art as a form, and though its voice was thin and lacked authority, it was nonetheless prophetic, foretelling almost every major development in electronic art over the next quarter century.

Some artists, like Aldo Tambellini and Thomas Tadolock, made pure abstractions out of the transmission signals that ordinarily produced representations of housewives, cowboys and car chases. (My set occasionally does that on its own, but then I call the cable company.) Tadolock's "Archetron" was a device for transforming live signals into patterns that resembled stained-glass rose windows constantly radiating from a center.

Joe Weintraub's "AC/TV (Audio-Controlled Television)" converted music into colored forms on a television set, fulfilling Vasily Kandinsky's dream of making sounds produce their equivalents in color. (Not to mention updating the opening sequence in Walt Disney's "Fantasia.") Weintraub's gizmo clipped onto a television antenna, turning every set owner into a potential electronic abstractionist.

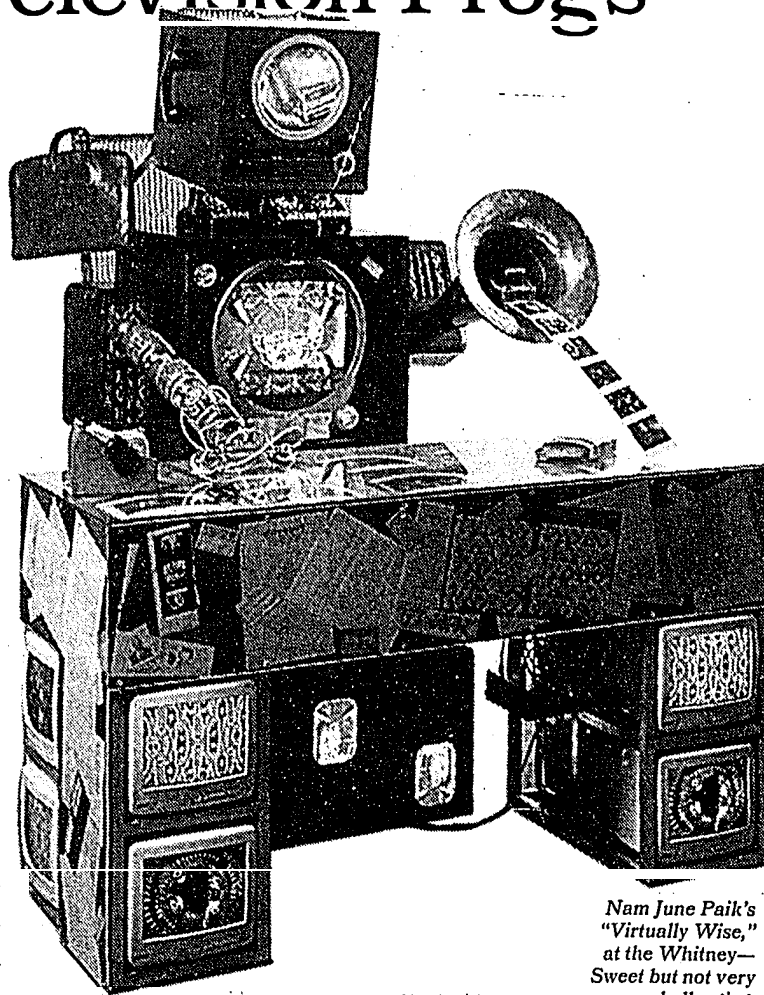
Art and television actually struck up a close alliance. In fact, broadcast television had encouraged its audience to be artists on

**While television has been manipulating almost everything, artists have been desperately manipulating television.**

its very first regular show, "Radio City Matinee," in 1946, offering drawing lessons on the tube. The teacher was so popular that he soon had his own series, "You Are an Artist," which ran in syndication until 1970. (Marc H. Miller dug up this bit of information for a show called "Television's Impact on Contemporary Art," which he organized for the Queens Museum in 1986.)

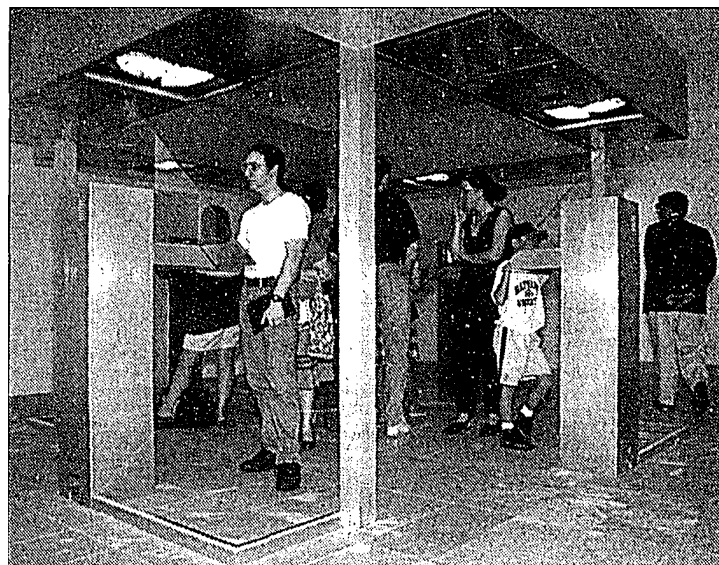
Several artists in the Howard Wise show had soaring ambitions for a medium they had jolted out of mundanity into modernism. Nam June Paik proposed a "Silent TV Station" — a most original, even radical idea — that played "mood art." "What I am aiming at," Mr. Paik said, is a "TV version of Vivaldi ... or electronic Compoz, to soothe every hysteric woman through air, and to calm down the nervous tension of every businessman through air." Eric Siegel thought artists could turn television into a "mass healing device."

Others wanted to turn the set itself into a new objet d'art or to use live broadcasts in alien contexts. Some put the viewers on the screen, making them at once observer and



Nam June Paik's "Virtually Wise," at the Whitney—Sweet but not very challenging.

Chris Gornien/Carl Solway Gallery/Whitney Museum of American Art



Adam Fernandez for The New York Times

Visitors at Luc Courchesne's "Family Portrait," at the Museum of Modern Art.

observed. Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider's nine-screen "Wipe Cycle" showed gallery visitors to themselves, alternating their images with network broadcasts and with images of those same viewers taken 8 seconds or 16 seconds earlier, so that they had the confounding experience of watching themselves in the present and the past at once.

Most prophetic of all were a couple of experiments in interaction. Mr. Paik's "Participation TV (No. 2)" is a set with a bundle of busily oscillating, squiggly lines on the screen. A pair of microphones in front of the set invite the viewer to "Talk Whistle Scrape Hit!" any one of which elongates, expands or maddens the little lines. That qualifies as participation, if an early stage of it, and voice-activated to boot. But after all, changing channels by hand also qualifies, and produces more startling results.

For interaction at the much vaunted new level, try "Family Portrait," Mr. Courchesne's installation at the Modern. Here life-size, still, head-and-shoulders images of men and women loom in the air behind four slanted glass panels. Actually reflected from overhead monitors, they seem fully three-dimensional but also oddly immaterial.

Before each image is a console that offers viewers a choice of questions to put to these strangers: What do you do? What really matters to you? Would you like to have a cup of coffee with me? With two or three questions to choose from, the conversation can go in several directions. In response, after a pause, the image becomes animated and answers, sometimes volubly, occasionally irritably. If you choose a remark like "I don't believe what you said," he or she is likely to say "We have nothing to say to each other" and stop talking altogether.

There are eight people — when one finishes, another appears — and they are all friends. Courchesne calls the piece "Family Portrait," a comment on the new kinds of "families" that are developing on networks and computer bulletin boards. His people are high-powered talkers, remarking sometimes on the nature of this odd transaction they actually engaged in during a taping session before you came: "We can say that we are virtual or real, really artificial or artificially virtual; gibberish all of it, I think. It serves no purpose. In any case everything is real ..."

Occasionally, if the room is not crowded, one of the people you are not talking to pipes up from his or her position with a relevant remark, extending the interaction. The project is amusing, curious, smart — a sophisticated game, more interactive than a shopping network, less so than on-line chat or video conferences.

But in any case everything is virtual: they interact with a question, not with you, and though you control the direction of the dialogue, the content is someone else's. There is something a bit spooky about thinking that once television rendered us passive and removed us from human contact we might come to this, giving and taking with someone who does not, cannot, give and take with us.

The Japanese are developing a "person" who can be installed in a PC to respond to some oral questions and commands, remind us of appointments and so on. Eventually computer owners could select a face for this new roommate: your wife, your favorite movie star. I think I'll pass. I get the creeps from elevators that announce that they're going up, I don't want my car to talk to me, and I don't want Fred Astaire nagging me about paying my bills. One thing I don't need in a machine is charm. When it comes to interaction, give me an unpredictable, unreliable, unprogrammed, even an inartistic human being any time at all.